

# Gorbachev loses his argument with the Lithuanians

By Quentin Peel

PRESIDENT Mikhail Gorbachev flew back to Moscow on Saturday after apparently failing to convince the leaders of the rebellious Lithuanian republic not to break away from his ruling Communist Party.

Three days of bruising encounters with farm and factory workers, crowds in the streets, intellectuals and local officials of both the Communist Party and the republican government, left all sides if anything more entrenched in their previous positions.

The Lithuanian Communist Party leadership is still determined to break away from the Moscow party. The minority of loyalists to the union, who have established their own rump central committee, are equally adamant that such a move is treachery.

And the overwhelming majority of the people in the streets – whether deliberate demonstrators, or just crowds out to see Mr Gorbachev – showed that their sympathies are with outright independence.

Mr Vytautas Landsbergis, the music professor who heads Sajudis, the moderate Lithuanian national movement, said that if anything, Mr Gorbachev's visit had boosted patriotic feeling.

It certainly brought the biggest crowd onto the streets to demand outright independence – possibly 200,000 people – since Sajudis was founded in 1988.

Yet the key question for Mr Gorbachev may yet prove to be not whether he could sway the Lithuanians with the sheer force of his personality and rhetoric, but whether he can persuade native Russians, and the majority in his own central committee, to accept the inevitability of the process, and not to retaliate with counter-productive sanctions.

Throughout his entire visit, the Soviet leader had his eye on two separate audiences (and indeed a third, if you include the international community.) One was the Lithuanian people, and in particular the local Communist Party.

Nothing he said could be construed as giving them encouragement to quit the union, not even the promise of a law spelling out the precise process of secession. All the indications are that such a law

would be highly restrictive of such a move, not liberal, by insisting that all the union republics have a say in the process, possibly through a national referendum.

Again and again, he hammered home all the disadvantages, above all economic – chiefly the questions of energy supply and infrastructure links, but also ominous hints about Soviet security, and what would have to be done to compensate citizens who did not want to go along with an independent Lithuanian state.

Behind it all was another threat: that in seeking to break away, whether from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) or the USSR itself, Lithuania might cause a backlash against the very process of perestroika.

When he saw more demonstrators demanding "freedom and independence", he retorted that the demonstration showed that freedom had indeed come to Lithuania – and it had come thanks to perestroika.

"Believe me, it will take root here and will grow deeper only if the perestroika process continues, if perestroika itself takes deep roots all over the union."

In lecturing so sharply to the Lithuanians, he may well have alienated some of the sympathy he had there. Has he done enough to show his own home audience back in the Russian federation that he cannot be personally blamed for a Lithuanian secession?

On the positive side, he argued consistently and extremely forcefully, using both anger and reason.

On the negative side, he lost the argument. Above all in an exchange with the articulate Lithuanian intelligentsia, he showed he could be outsmarted. Soviet leaders have never before been shown in such a light.

Now he has to face his own central committee again, when the plenary meeting on Lithuania reconvenes at the end of the month. He is talking about finding a reasonable compromise. The danger is that his own party may be in no mood for a compromise.

All he has going for him is the familiar, and still powerful threat: that without Gorbachev, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is on a hiding to nothing.